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The Age of the Extant Columns of the Olympieum at Athens¹

By A. D. FRASER

NO great building of antiquity has possessed a more curious history than has the temple of Olympian Zeus at Athens—curious, that is, in so far as its history has been preserved to the modern world; for this magnificent monument has been surrounded, as it were, with a cloud of obscurity and almost mystery alike in its time of construction and in that of its decay. Projected and begun in the sixth century before Christ, the temple witnessed the rolling by of more than six hundred years before it finally reached completion, at a time when the true glories of Greece had long since fallen in the dust.

Meagre as is the light thrown upon the history of the Olympieum from literary sources, we are nevertheless able to discern the following facts. The idea of paying honor to the king of gods and men by the erection of a temple to his divinity at Athens was conceived in the mind of the despot Peisistratus, who, after selecting a suitable site on the banks of the Ilissus, laid the foundations in about the year 530 B. C. The work progressed and, if we are to put faith in the observation of a late writer,² the structure was half-finished when, twenty years later, Athens asserted her freedom and rid herself of the obnoxious family of tyrants. Whatever the state of its advancement may have been, we are justified in the belief that the Athenians took but little pride in this adornment of their city. Why, otherwise,

¹This article is an epitome of a paper recently read before the Archæological Seminary of the Johns Hopkins University. I am indebted to the director of the seminary, Professor David M. Robinson, for valuable assistance and suggestions. I wish also to thank Professor W. B. Dinsmoor of Columbia University for information regarding a supposed Olympieum capital.

²*Geog. Græci Min.* 1, 97 sq.

would the literary men refer to it only by way of a landmark, and that too but seldom? It is impossible in this respect to disregard the judgment of the philosopher Aristotle,¹ who compares the erection of this sanctuary with the construction of the pyramids of Egypt and the great public works of the despots of Samos and Corinth, and stigmatizes the whole as characteristic of the most odious feature of tyranny, the drugging, as it were, of the human mind, so as to leave no opportunity for revolutionary schemes.

For three centuries and more the unfinished temple lay neglected and by the end of this period had in all probability fallen into a state of decay. Public spirit at Athens was virtually dead, and a few more generations might well have seen the obliteration of the very site of the sanctuary, when a new builder appeared on the scene. The great Hellenizing monarch of the east, Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid King of Syria, after ruthlessly doing violence to the worship of Jehovah at Jerusalem, came to Athens with a proposal to revive the cult of Zeus. But the Athenians had no temple to this deity other than the crumbling ruin on the banks of the Ilissus. Antiochus, therefore, having infinite resources at his command, proceeded to restore, or rather to rebuild, the temple. It is characteristic of this fanatical and eccentric monarch that, while retaining the original site, he went to extreme pains in altering the orientation of the building, so as to make it face as nearly due east as was possible with the engineering instruments of his time. This fact has been revealed to us by archæologists, not by the Greek or Roman writers. Needless to say, attention to the carrying out of this mystical detail very considerably enhanced the pretentious nature of the undertaking, and the death of Epiphanes in 164 once more occasioned the abandoning of the work, again, if we are to believe Strabo, in a "half finished" condition.

The century succeeding this abortive attempt is a period of darkness in respect to the Olympieum's history. It is recorded, however, by Pliny the Elder that Sulla filched certain of the columns of the Athenian temple and later employed them in the building of his sanctuary to Jupiter

¹*Polit.* 5, 11, 8.

Capitolinus at Rome.¹ According to the various theories of modern scholars, these may have been discarded pillars dating from the time of Peisistratus; or they may have been relatively small columns from the cella of Antiochus' temple; or the whole may be a pure fabrication, based on a consideration of the well-known propensities of Sulla. The truth will probably never be known. Again, several decades later, in the age of Augustus, as Suetonius records,² a scheme was set on foot for the completion of the Olympieum by certain dignitaries who were allied with Rome. But if any work of construction was actually begun, as seems most unlikely, it must have been almost immediately relinquished; otherwise we should undoubtedly have some notice of the matter from the contemporary panegyrists of the emperor, nor would the *Monumentum Ancyranum* be silent.

Another century rolled by, and the Olympieum was at last finished and dedicated by that distinguished friend of Greek culture, the emperor Hadrian. He who labored so tirelessly for the revival and propagation of Hellenic art and learning was not likely to slight the "eye of Greece." Athens was enriched under Hadrian's rule with a goodly number of monuments of art, and the temple of Olympian Zeus, which had lain unfinished for twenty long generations, at last saw its completion in or about the year 131 A. D. It was of little import that Hadrian now began to identify himself with Zeus and to assume the title *Olympius*, that an altar and a symbol of his divinity were consecrated to him in the temple, and that he demanded sacrifices and other divine honors from the priests. The "*Götterdämmerung*" of the Olympian deities had already come. Zeus or Hadrian—it mattered little. As for the Olympieum itself, its construction must have always been associated in the mind of the Athenian with the name of despot, foreign adventurer, plunderer, and overlord.

There follows a gap in our history of fully 1300 years. What happened to the Olympieum in the meantime we can only conjecture. It appears probable that decay set in early and was rapid, though there is no evidence in the sur-

¹N. H. 36, 5, 45.

²Aug. 60.

viving remains for a catastrophe such as wrought havoc with the beauties of the Parthenon. As the building disintegrated, a small church was built among the ruins largely out of the material of the temple itself. But no written word concerning the Olympieum has come down to us till we reach the fifteenth century of our era. The great explorer and traveller, Cyriac of Ancona, rediscovered the temple in the year 1436. The ravages of time and of humanity were at that date very manifest; for of the total of 104 main columns of the temple, only "about 21" were found standing. Thereafter we have a more or less continuous series of references to the temple (usually wrongly identified, however), from the successive visits of travellers to the city. Within the course of the two centuries following Cyriac, some four of the columns disappeared, but a total of seventeen survived till after the middle of the eighteenth century, when one was destroyed by a Turkish governor. Finally, a great storm and earthquake in 1852 resulted in the overthrow of still another of these massive pillars. Today this fallen monarch and fifteen standing companions survive; little change has taken place in the ruins during the last three centuries. This noteworthy preservation of the temple—and that, too, mainly under Turkish rule—seems to be accounted for in part if not wholly by the superstitious beliefs that have long been associated popularly with the shrine. Voices of lamentation have been heard from the ruins, and at night black spirits have been seen to leap from column to column, as though the ghosts of the long dead Peisistratus, Antiochus, and Hadrian were striving to preserve their sanctuary!

The temple of the Olympian Zeus, as it stood completed in the second century of our era, might well have ranked with the seven wonders of the ancient world and merited the judgment of Livy, "*templum . . . unum in terris inchoatum pro magnitudine dei*,"¹ expressed, moreover, a century earlier, when it was far from completion. Pausanias puts the peribolos of the temple at a length of four stades,² and measurements of the great stone platform on which the

¹41, 20, 8.

²1, 18, 6-8.

building stands show that his estimate is not far from being exact. The fifteen columns which still stand (Fig. 1) are approximately of a height of 56 feet, 6 inches, while the extreme height of the building must have been more than 90 feet. The temple was octostyle (not decastyle, as was long supposed), having eight columns on the ends; its extreme length and breadth were 354 and 135 feet respectively. The structure, furthermore, was dipteral, with a double row of columns surrounding the cella, 20 on either side. It is impossible here to enter into the disputed question as to whether the temple was hypæthral, having the naos wholly or partially open to the sky. The architectural order employed was the Corinthian, the sole example of the Corinthian to be found in a sacred building in the city of Athens.

The first attempt at securing measurements of the ruined temple was made by the traveller Francis Vernon in 1676, but no detailed description of the building was published till the appearance of one in the monumental work of Stuart and Revett, *The Antiquities of Athens* (Vol. III), in 1794, and again, in the enlarged and improved edition of 1827. Scientific methods were first applied to the study of the remains by the architect Penrose, who in 1851 and again in 1888 brought out his *Principles of Athenian Architecture*. A comprehensive essay dealing with the Olympieum was written in 1883 by Professor Louis Bevier (*Papers Am. School of Class. Stud. at Athens*, Vol. 1), who was at that time a student in Greece. The building has, however, been notably neglected by archæologists. Penrose and others carried out some minor excavations among the ruins, but there is still here untouched what will constitute at some time a fruitful field for future investigators.

In view of what we may term the composite authorship of the Olympieum, the question has often been raised: who erected the sixteen columns that we have today? Of course, Peisistratus, though undoubtedly some of his work survives in the foundation of the building, must be ruled out of court entirely. It has been determined, as noted above, that the temple received a new orientation at the hands of Antiochus, and, moreover, the Corinthian order of archi-

ture is not so old as the *tyrannus*. Was the builder, then, Antiochus or Hadrian or, conceivably, Augustus? The thing was questioned as long ago as 1827, when the second edition of the *Antiquities of Athens* appeared, and has never been fully and satisfactorily dealt with. Penrose was apparently the first to face the problem frankly; in his edition of 1851 he hazarded the guess, presumably voicing contemporary opinion, that the work was done under Augustus. The sole basis for this unfortunate conjecture lay in some superficial resemblances between the workmanship of the Olympieum and that of one or more Augustan buildings. But Penrose had too much intellectual honesty to maintain for long such a view; so, in his later edition, we find him formally recanting and declaring in favor of Epiphanes. This judgment is founded upon certain architectural and stylistic principles which the author outlines, and his theory has been followed by such scholars as Ernest Gardner, Weller, Bevier, Spiers, and J. G. Frazer. In opposition are the architects Sturgis and Durm and others, who "on the whole" are inclined to favor the theory of a Hadrianic origin. Credit must, however, be given to Penrose for presenting a carefully reasoned brief for his side of the case. The opponents of his view content themselves, for the most part, with either a dogmatic assertion or else with the *a priori* argument that Hadrian is nearer to us in point of time and had the last hand in the construction of the temple, therefore, in all probability he erected the part which survives. Any such contention, while specious, can hardly be accepted without the addition of more definite grounds for belief.

It is clearly demonstrable that the columns of the Olympieum which we see in Athens today were constructed under the supervision of either Epiphanes or Hadrian, monarchs who were separated one from the other by a period of three centuries. Let us review for a moment the position of each in the ancient world and the type of art which he cultivated. The Syrian king, fanatical though he may have been, had nevertheless a definite goal in view throughout his twelve-year regime. His aim was the Hellenizing of Asia, just as in the West the Romans were Latinizing Italy; and it was with

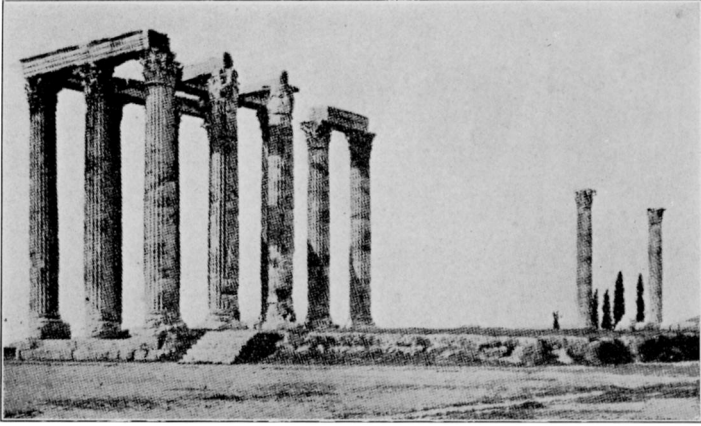


FIG. 1—ATHENS, OLYMPIEUM



FIG. 2—ATHENS, OLYMPIEUM: CAPITAL

a view to this that his energies were so ruthlessly exerted in Palestine towards the crushing out of Judaism. But Athens was still one of the great sources of Hellenic culture, and Antiochus found it to his interest to pay court to the Athenians. For him Grecian culture was consummated in the Olympian Zeus, so it is no great wonder that we find him, on his arrival at Athens, undertaking to build again the sanctuary of Zeus that had fallen down. Curiously enough, his architect was not a Greek but a Roman, but there can be little doubt that the artistic principles manifested in the new edifice were those favored by Epiphanes himself. They may have possessed more than a suggestion of Oriental color and richness, but they must certainly have embodied the best and finest ideals of the later Hellenistic period.

Nor was Hadrian any less a Greek in spirit. "He was so thoroughly familiar with Greek literature," writes an ancient biographer, "that he was called 'the little Greek.' He had completely adopted the studies, the manner of life, the language, and the whole culture of the Athenians."¹ And as Gregorovius, his modern biographer, remarks: "The renaissance of the antique is one of the most marked features of Hadrian's mind . . . If he failed in his attempt to revive the arts, the fault lay in the times, not in himself."² It is therefore no surprise to find that the art—and perhaps in particular the architectural art—of the time of Hadrian, and indeed of the second century after Christ in general, is based on ancient models more closely than is even that of the age of Augustus. Hence, we may expect to find the types of art which flourished under Hadrian and under Antiochus far from unlike in many important characteristics. This circumstance more than any other has, I think, thrown a stumbling-block in the way of those who have attempted to reach a successful conclusion as to the dating of the Olympieum. The point is one of extreme importance and can never be safely overlooked in a discussion of this problematical affair.

¹Aurelius Victor, *Epitome* 14.

²*Life of Hadrian*, p. 333.

In our examination of the question it will be found convenient to revert to the work of Penrose, on whose authority the extant temple has so often been assigned to the age of Antiochus, and to review briefly the arguments upon which his claim is based. Four features of the columns are cited by him as determinants: (1) the general workmanship; (2) the character of the entasis; (3) the form of the abacus; (4) the type of acanthus leaf on the capital. Let us examine these in order (*Cf.* Fig. 2).

The nature of the workmanship, says Penrose, is that of the Hellenistic period rather than that of late Roman work. The statement is obviously a very indefinite one, as its author would doubtless have acknowledged. Furthermore, there is a marked difference between the workmanship which we find on the buildings of Hadrian and on the rapidly degenerating monuments of the third and fourth centuries of our era which Penrose seems to have had in mind. On the other hand, there is, as we have indicated above, a striking resemblance between Hadrianic art and that of Hellenistic and even earlier times.

The entasis of the columns is acknowledged by the architect to be of a character inferior to that manifested in the great works of art on the Acropolis, but it is said to avoid the tendency to extreme exaggeration which occurs in late Roman temples. This argument, however, is weak; Penrose must have been thinking of the ugly "bulgy" column which is to be associated with the period of extreme decadence in Roman architectural art, and which was quite foreign to the best efforts of the second century A. D.

The third argument of Penrose appears on the face of it to be more weighty. His contention is that in the older temples of the Corinthian order the curves of the abacus were so arranged as to avoid the extreme elongation of the corner angles which is to be observed on the abaci of the majority of Roman buildings. It must be confessed that many of the temples erected by Hadrian and his successors do present this feature. But, on the other hand, Penrose failed to note that the lines of the abacus of the arch of Hadrian which stands almost within the shadow of the Olympieum are almost identical with those of the temple;

nor is there any marked dissimilarity of form in the abacus of the library of Hadrian on the farther side of the Acropolis. Of still greater importance is the fact that the temple of Apollo at Miletus,¹ which is much earlier than the time of Antiochus, bears an abacus with considerably sharper corner-angles than those of the Olympieum. It follows that the "sharp-angle" was no invention of the Romans; the form of abacus cannot be looked upon as a definitely determining factor in a discussion of this kind.

The question of the form of acanthus leaf which we see on the capitals of the temple of Olympian Zeus is an extremely important one, and it involves a study of the subject which can at best be only summarized here. If we leave out of consideration the monument of Lysicrates, whose capitals bear a unique type of foliage, we are justified, I think, in the assertion that the leafage of all purely Greek Corinthian capitals is essentially of a single type. There are minor variations, to be sure, but there are no great divergences from the orthodox form, which to me, at least, seems to be a conventionalized imitation of the leaf of the *acanthus mollis* of nature. In Roman architecture, however, the case is altogether different. A wide latitude was allowed the sculptor, who not infrequently wandered far afield and produced such types as the "herb-leaf" which we see on the temple of Vesta at Tivoli,² and the "fine-serrate," appearing, for example, on the triumphal arches³ of Severus, Constantine, and Sergius. To what we may term the stereotyped Roman form there has been applied the name "olive-leaved" acanthus, a style which is seen at its best in the luxuriant and graceful foliage on the temple of Mars Ultor,⁴ a very characteristic form of the Augustan age. Manifestly, the leaf has been imitated from Greek originals, probably Alexandrian, but one is strongly reminded of the drooping and florid foliage of the tropics. In the second century, however, the details were radically altered; an element of reserve and austerity was introduced; the leaf,

¹Cf. Von Soldern, *Architekt. Formentl.*, p. 116.

²Uhde, *The Architectural Forms of the Classic Ages*, pl. 44.

³*Ibid.*, pl. 54, figs. 1, 2, 3.

⁴*Ibid.*, pl. 38, fig. 2.

in short, became simplified and conventionalized, and there was a definite reversion to classical models. Hadrian, of course, led the way, and quite obviously fashioned his leaf after the pattern of the Greek original.

What is perhaps the strongest point in the argument of Penrose is his comparison of the acanthus foliage of the Olympieum with that of the Tholos of Epidauros (Fig. 3), built in the fourth century, B. C. It cannot be denied that the resemblance is strikingly close. In either case the body of the leaf lies close to the bell of the capital and is of a severe and subdued style, of stiff and clear-cut outline. But a feature which would tend to militate in the opposite direction is the downward-turned tips of the leaves, something which is characteristic of the leaf of the second century A. D. and indeed of Roman work in general (*Cf.* Fig. 5). If, furthermore, the capital be compared as closely with typical work of the age of Hadrian as with the older monuments, the striking resemblances of the two become at once at least equally patent. One has but to compare the capitals of Hadrian's monuments in Athens herself—such as the arch (Fig. 5), the library, and the capital in the National Museum which belongs to a Hadrianic building to the north-west of the Acropolis¹—to see the truth of this. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that Hadrian consciously imitated the style of foliage of the period to which the Tholos belongs.

Up to this point the weights in the scales seem to balance pretty evenly; but three other possible determinants have not yet been thrown into the pan. These were not cited by Penrose nor, as far as I am aware, by any other scholar, but the importance of at least one of them seems altogether preëminent. Let us consider (1) the amount of ornamentation, consisting of leafage and scrolls or volutes, relative to the entire surface area of the capital; (2) the position of the middle volutes; (3) the acanthus bloom on the side of the capital.

¹This capital (No. 1496, Nat. Mus.), which was discovered near the Hephæsteum in 1891, was originally thought to have belonged to the Olympieum (*Cf.* Anderson and Spiers, *Archit. of Greece and Rome*, 1902, fig. 72). This view is now untenable, but the capital doubtless has come from one of Hadrian's buildings which are known to have been erected in this neighborhood.



FIG. 3—EPIDAUROS,
THOLOS: CAPITAL



FIG. 4—ROME, VILLA MEDICI:
CAPITAL FROM THE ARA PACIS



FIG. 5—ATHENS, ARCH OF HADRIAN:
CAPITAL

Generally speaking, there is a reasonably definite distinction to be drawn in this respect between the Greek and Roman capital. The former is as a rule only partially covered with decoration, while the Romans preferred to mask almost entirely the face of the bell. It is to be observed that the capital of the Olympieum conforms to the latter type rather than to the former; the bell is obscured to a much greater degree than in the case of the Tholos capital, or, in fact, any of the orthodox Greek type.

The degree of elaboration or ornamentation to be discerned on the volutes is a matter of no consequence from our point of view, as some archaic buildings possess them in a highly ornate form, while on certain late Roman works we find them severely plain; but the position of the middle volutes with reference to each other is a matter of moment. It is to my mind very suggestive that in most, if not all, Greek buildings, where the middle volutes are present and are, as is regularly the case, placed so as to confront each other as on the Olympieum capital, they are brought into actual contact one with the other. But here they are separated by a space of several inches (*Cf.* Figs. 3 and 2). This, as will be shown a little later, is a marked characteristic of the capital of the second century of our era.

One of the crowning beauties of the Corinthian capital is found in the acanthus bloom, or the occasional palmette, which stands on the face of the bell or on the side of the abacus, above the middle volutes. It varies greatly both as to form and as to position, though on Roman buildings we usually find it elevated to the side of the abacus. The Roman flower, likewise, as a rule received a greater degree of elaboration than its Greek prototype, although there are notable exceptions. Something, however, which is of the greatest importance is to be observed in the case of the acanthus bloom of the Olympieum. It is supported in its position, as it were, by a long graceful stem which passes between the two middle scrolls and takes its origin among the leaves beneath. It seems altogether surprising that so acute an observer as Penrose was not struck by the significance of this artistic motive. In a comparison of this capital with that of the Tholos, it is evident that an entirely fresh detail

has here been added; the flower of the Tholos capital appears as attached directly to the side of the bell.

A careful study of the acanthus bloom as we find it on the Corinthian capital during the long period stretching from the fourth century B. C. to the third century A. D. reveals some startling facts. In the first place, so far as I have been able to find, the flower stalk *motif* is altogether unknown in Greek art, if we except the possibility of the Olympieum being a Greek ruin. In the Roman age, its first appearance that I can discover is on the engaged capitals of the Ara Pacis of Augustus (Fig. 4), a monument which, it may be observed, is frequently appraised by critics as being Greek in general conception, Italian in its details. The stem also appears on the great temple at Pola¹ in Istria, which is of about the same date, and there is a very rudimentary flower stalk to be seen on the capitals of the temple of Mars Ultor. A very few other examples occur in the second half of the first century A. D., as on a pilaster from the Roman theatre at Ephesus and on the capitals of the temple of Isis at Pompeii.² But in all these instances there appears a hesitation, as it were, on the part of the artist against letting the flower stalk be fully seen. It is of a rudimentary and undeveloped form, and is partially hidden behind the middle volutes, which still come into contact as on Greek capitals. But—and here we have something of paramount importance—in the second century this feature of the parted scrolls and conspicuous flower stalk springs into sudden popularity. It takes precisely the form in which we have it on the Olympieum, and it appears, *e. g.*, on the monument of Philopappus, built at Athens in the time of Trajan, fifteen years before the completion of the Olympieum; the temple of Antonine and Faustina, finished ten years after our temple; the temple at Dugga in Tunis, 166-169; the temple of Vesta at Rome, finally restored in 191. Of still greater moment is the fact that this *motif* is found to constitute what may almost be termed the trade-mark of Hadrian's work. Thus, we see it on the capitals of both the library and the arch of Had-

¹Sturgis, *Hist. of Architecture*, Vol. 1, p. 354.

²Uhde, *op. cit.*, pl. 40, fig. 10.

rian (Fig. 5) at Athens, as well as on the museum capital already mentioned as belonging to a Hadrianic building.¹ It is also present on the following works which were either built or restored by Hadrian: the propylæa at Eleusis, the Pantheon, the temple of Neptune, the Basilica Aemilia, the temple of Castor, the temple to the Genius of Rome at Ephesus, and others.

The case may now be thus briefly summarized. In our re-examination of the argument of Penrose, it is revealed that the evidence for the Epiphanic authorship of the extant columns is much weaker than formerly supposed, and that the claim of Hadrian seems at least equally strong. But we later discover that in the flower stalk motive appearing on the Olympieum we have something which is essentially non-Greek, something indeed which does not appear to have had its origin till Roman imperial times. The device is at first used with hesitation and does not become fully developed till about the time of Hadrian. This emperor adopts it with enthusiasm, and it presently appears as almost a distinguishing feature of his work. The inference is obvious; there can be no room for reasonable doubt that we are indebted to Hadrian for the columns which survive.

It may perhaps be questioned whether it is safe to base this conclusion on what is after all little more than a single artistic detail. But I do not fear to do so; the history of the feature is too significant, and from the very nature of the case its introduction would be a late device. According to the tradition of the Greeks, the early architectural acanthus blooms were fashioned out of bronze, and the heart of the flower was represented by the head of the pin whereby they were attached to the capital. Thus, they would theoretically require no stem, and the invention of the latter would surely appear to have taken place at some late date when the tradition was forgotten or disregarded. Furthermore, the flower stalk is apparently unknown to Vitruvius, who fails to make mention of it in his detailed description of the Corinthian capital; and here the *argumen-*

¹Except that on this capital the middle volutes come into contact, as they occasionally do also on the library capitals.

tum a silentio cannot be deemed worthless, for he specifically mentions the flower itself.

To Hadrian, then, we must assign the extant capitals, at least—in all probability, the entire columns as well. Just how far Antiochus went in his construction we shall probably never know.¹

¹This article had gone to the press before the appearance in America of E. Weigand's *Vorgeschichte des korinthischen Kapitells* (Würzburg, 1920). The writer has, therefore, been unable to utilize the material of this valuable work.